

Prose Style: The Forgotten Element in Composition Courses

Shaun GATES

Abstract

Evidence suggests that many North American and British college students lack the ability to write well despite the widespread availability of composition textbooks. In *Style: an Anti-Textbook*, Richard Lanham argues the two are linked: these textbooks exhort students to write an objective, neutral style of academic prose that is difficult to learn because it is too narrowly limited by the virtues of clarity, plainness and sincerity. Students are more likely to write well if they first learn to imitate, and translate between, a broad range of different prose styles. In this paper I review *Style: an Anti-Textbook*, assessing its suggestions for teaching composition with reference to my own experiences.

Introduction

This is a hybrid paper. It is partly a review of Richard. A. Lanham's *Style: an Anti-Textbook*, and partly a re-consideration of my composition teaching in the light of his views. *Anti-Textbook*¹, first published in 1974, was written as a rebuff to the weighty writing guides commonly used in freshman composition courses at North American colleges. Unlike those guides, which Lanham sardonically calls The Books, *Anti-Textbook* does not provide an exhaustive list of "do's and don'ts." Over the course of seven short chapters, Lanham examines the assumptions these guidebooks

make about the writing of good prose — particularly, clarity, plainness, and sincerity — and shows by analysis and counter-example that these are faulty or incomplete.

I will be reviewing the second edition of *Anti-Text*, published in 2007. Lanham has refrained from heavily editing the first edition, something that might be warranted after a gap of three decades. Instead he has tacked on a short ‘afterthoughts’ section at the end of each chapter in which he re-examines his original arguments and evaluates their current value. So while in the first edition Lanham takes a swipe at the advertising industry for the injuries he feels it has inflicted on good prose style, in the afterthoughts section he concedes his original views were somewhat unsophisticated. Unfortunately, while Lanham has updated the new edition with his “afterthoughts” he neglected to add an index. I found it frustrating trying to remember places in the book that had specific recommendations for teaching prose.

The catalogues of educational and academic publishers list many writing guides, so why re-publish one written thirty-three years ago? (Indeed Lanham, an emeritus professor of English at UCLA, has published extensively on prose style since the first edition of *Anti-Textbook*.) The second edition of *Anti-Textbook* follows in the wake of his *Economics of Attention* (2006), so possibly the publisher was seeking to hitch a ride on the financial coat-tails of the newer book. But even if that were true, this book still has much to offer. Why, with so many writing textbooks on the market, is the quality

of writing among college students so poor? Lanham addresses this question to an American audience, and the students he has in mind are native English speakers, but you don't have to look too far to see that this question could be asked with equal validity in other English-speaking countries (Swain 2003). It is also a question I feel my own composition teaching needs to answer.

I teach two sophomore composition classes at Doshisha Women's College of Liberal Arts (DWCLA): an Accelerated English Skills (AES) class and a general writing class. *Anti-Text* deals with the problems of freshman composition, and because my AES students also struggle with academic essays, I will outline their course work first before I return to look at Lanham's views on the teaching of composition. The AES composition text is *Mosaic 2: Academic Essay Development* (2007), one textbook in a comprehensive series that spans four ability levels and the four language skills. *Mosaic 2* is an advanced level text, covering higher order writing strategies and critical thinking. The sections of each chapter cohere around a single topic, and the approach to learning is broadly inductive. My students move through three or four chapters a semester as follows: for homework they read the two or three page introduction to the topic and complete comprehension and vocabulary exercises. In the lessons that follow, they discuss aspects of the topic in small groups, and complete other exercises on language and writing skills. Once the chapter is exhausted, each student selects an essay title related to the topic. I set the deadline for submission three to four weeks in advance. During the intervening weeks some

time in class is spent working on the essay, and some on studying a new topic. But class work is not based solely around the textbook. I also ask the students to keep a journal, write on other topics, and work on vocabulary and sentence patterns.

If you teach a writing course the question that is never far from your mind is: How can I motivate my students? Speaking is fun — it's usually interactive, it happens in the present moment, it leads to immediate feedback, and, perhaps best of all for a student, just getting the words out leads to praise. Essay writing is a slog. It is solitary, it involves frequent revision, and when a student submits her final draft, she knows it will probably be returned covered with inked comments. If I, as a native speaker, feel daunted at the prospect of writing an academic essay, then it is not difficult to imagine the turmoil in my students' minds. One way I try to help them overcome the barriers to writing in English is to set a task which I hope will be intrinsically interesting. The AES syllabus limits what I can do, but once every semester I loosen the shackles a little by letting the students choose their own essay topic. My hope is that a personal choice will spur them to write a lot and to write well.

I learnt another approach to help students overcome “writer's block” from Professor Bill Reis, who helped set up the AES course along with other faculty members. He suggested I get my students to keep a writing journal. Journal writing is not directly related to academic writing per se, but it gives students the opportunity to

write at length without feeling stress. The method is simple. Between lessons, each student writes down anything of interest in her journal. Frequent topics are part-time work, travel, movies and the like. In the classroom, students exchange journals, read the most recent entries and then write a response. I have found it is a good way to “warm up” the class, and because I collect the journals twice a semester, I can identify individual weaknesses and find out what interests my students. These insights feed back into my teaching. To sum up, setting engaging tasks and journal writing have been the ways I have hitherto used to motivate my AES students. But one area I had not considered was encouraging them to take pleasure in using words:

Motive has always been a question of questions for Freshman Composition. Perhaps more success might flow from assuming, paradoxically, that the deepest motive for writing is not communication at all but the pleasures of writing for its own sake. Writing to others is a writing for ourselves. Clarity in communication may be less the cause of our pleasure in prose than the results. (p.180).

Lanham says writing textbooks and courses remove this source of pleasure by requiring students to focus exclusively on developing a neutral, objective prose style — also called the normative scientific style. To reach the summit occupied by this prose style, students must slavishly follow the path marked out by clarity, plainness, and sincerity. Unfortunately for many, the path peters out, leaving them stranded. The first edition of *Anti-Text*

mentions a long-running instructional programme at Dartmouth College designed to improve the compositional abilities of students. Despite their high academic level and motivation, and despite the best efforts of their teachers, improvements in student writing were limited and transitory. The intervention targeted all freshmen, but by the time these students had reached their final year, only those who had enrolled on English literature courses retained any gain. If anything, standards seem to have fallen further since *Anti-Text* was first published. Lanham refers us to an article in the *Wall Street Journal*. The article records the frustration employers feel trying to find MBA graduates who can write a coherent letter or memo (Klein 2007). Note these are post-graduate students. In the UK, the situation is no better. In *Writing Matters: the Royal Literary Fund Report on Student Writing in Higher Education* (2006), Murray and Kirton state, “No optimistic gloss can be put on it. No artfully crafted explanation will work. Large numbers of contemporary British undergraduates lack the basic ability to express themselves adequately in writing.” (p.7)

Clarity and Ornamentation

Throughout *Anti-Text*, Lanham questions our assumptions about what makes good prose. He does this with a light touch but his purpose is serious. It is blind faith in these assumptions, he suggests, that is responsible for the sorry state of writing composition. In the first couple of chapters, he asks us to take a fresh look at the emphasis given to clarity, the chief imperative of most writing guidebooks. Thus, he is withering about the objective

prose style whose sole purpose is to reveal underlying concepts. “The best style is the never-noticed. Ideally, prose style should, like the state under Marxism, wither away, leaving the plain facts shining unto themselves.” (p.25) The obsession with clarity, with putting meaning above all else, leads him to conclude that the writing expected from students has a strong utilitarian flavour. A composition can only be seen to be “good” if the words it is comprised of can be seen through and the underlying message made clear.

Conversely, if a reader’s attention is drawn to the words themselves rather than to an underlying meaning, the writer is judged to have failed. But, as Lanham notes, a writer may have goals other than clarity. She may wish to draw attention to her verbal dexterity or wit. Or she may want to use verbal decoration as a way of hooking the reader into reading further. It is the prose surface, or the ornamentation of a piece of prose that catches our attention. Moreover, it is a mistake to associate the degree of ornamentation with a particular prose style. Traditionally, prose styles are classified as high, medium or low. Each style is identified by its purpose, effect or subject matter, and also by certain linguistic aspects such as diction, syntax and vocabulary. According to Lanham, this classification is unhelpful because each style may contain a mix of features. He quotes a line from King Lear where a passage of deep significance is delivered in simple prose. (p.72):

Pray, do not mock me:
 I am a very foolish fond old man,
 Fourscore and upward, not an hour more nor less;
 And, to deal plainly,
 I fear I am not in my perfect mind.
 (*King Lear* 4.7. 59-63)

So instead of the traditional tripartite division of prose, Lanham proposes assigning texts to points on a continuum that runs from opacity to transparency. To the extreme right lie mathematical equations and scientific formulas, whose symbols take us directly to an underlying meaning. To the extreme left, we find nonsense rhymes and word games that have no underlying meaning. Here the writer's intent is to get us to focus completely on the surface. Literary prose, however, does not occupy a single point on the spectrum. As we might expect, James Joyce's work is found over to the left, towards opacity, but, so at times can be Hemingway's work, a writer whose prose style is usually described as limpid. How does Lanham justify this placement? He supports his claim by taking a passage from the end of *A Farewell to Arms*. According to Lanham, Hemingway deliberately chooses a low but highly-controlled prose style to draw our attention to the quiet dignity of Fredric Henry. Henry stoically endures the death of his lover, Catherine Barkley, but we peer through his words towards an insight into his character in vain; it is the verbal surface of the prose that conveys his dignity. (p.81).

This discussion leads to some important pedagogical points.

First, the objective style is both difficult to learn and teach because the writer must somehow make herself vanish from the page to leave a perfect transparent surface. For, “If you are trying to teach composition, and your ideal is an invisible one, it makes teaching it kind of hard.” (p.103). Second, composition textbooks require students to *write* a style of prose that is unrepresentative of their reading. In their composition class, they focus only on the objective prose style, but in a subject class, like history for example, students may read materials whose prose styles range from the densely opaque to the crystal clear. This must be confusing — and not just for North American college students. At DWCLA and other Japanese colleges, it is increasingly common for students to take content classes in English alongside composition classes.

The solution the *Anti-Text* proposes is a return to a style of learning an Elizabethan schoolboy would have been familiar with. This involves imitating the style of a well-known writer, comparison with the original, then further imitation and comparison. Or, learning to translate from one prose style into another.² Lanham goes so far as to claim that if a student is taught to write the objective prose style only, she will never come to write it at all. She must study a range of styles if she is to write any one of them well. I find these insights and suggestions appealing. I think Lanham is right in asking us to reconsider the undue weight we give to academic essays. If clarity is such an important goal, perhaps it should be unyoked from the academic

essay; let students express themselves clearly in a format they feel comfortable with. We should also recognise that clarity is not a motivator. Composition textbooks gives reams of advice on how to write clearly: *divide your essay into three sections; begin each paragraph with a topic sentence; provide support for your thesis*. How do these instructions inspire a student to write?

Jargon

*Jargon*¹ *n.* words or expressions used by a particular group or profession.

*Jargon*² *n.* a translucent, colourless or smoky variety of zircon.

(Oxford English Dictionary)

Critics of jargon say it erects an unnecessary or even intentional barrier to communication. The positive case for jargon is that it allows experts within a particular field to communicate with precision. Jargon, then, is not necessarily at odds with clarity. A government policy document may confuse the average citizen but be perfectly clear to the bureaucrat who has learnt to decode its jargon. Verbal jargon, like its chemical counterpart, can be translucent, even colourless. In any case, for those who cloak their thoughts in jargon, clarity may be of far less importance than credibility. Lanham compares an excerpt from *The Social System* written by Talcott Parsons with its “translation” into plain English by another well-known sociologist, C. Wright Mills. Mills condenses three jargon-laden paragraphs into two short, clear sentences. (pp.106-107). Yet if a sociology student were to write a term paper

with similar clarity, she would not be taken seriously by her classmates or professor. Jargon may impede understanding but it confers legitimacy among the users of a particular jargon.

So yet again, students face possible confusion over prose styles. Their composition textbooks exhort them to write objective prose, but in their English literature and psychology classes they must learn to write the subject jargon if they are to be taken seriously. I believe this confusion also extends to Japanese learners of English. It partly explains why my AES students write essays that at times border on the incomprehensible. To them an academic essay does not represent a model of clarity but one of jargon. They struggle to express ideas and arguments in a prose style (and in a format) they are unfamiliar with.

I would like to illustrate this point by recalling an incident from a recent AES course. As I said previously, once a semester my AES students can choose their own essay topic from any discipline. Typically, at least half the class pick a trivial topic, so I have to badger them to recast it into something more acceptable. Their initial enthusiasm wanes further when I ask them for an outline to show me how they intend to structure their essay. So I have pushed them to write on a subject they may know little about or care for, and in a format they are not familiar with. The result? Essays which are hard to write and difficult to read. Against my better judgement, I recently let one student write on what I thought was an unsuitable topic — the creations of a

children's author. To my surprise, her composition was interesting, easy to follow, and had few mistakes. It was not an academic essay — there was little argument — but she felt passionate enough about her topic to write well. But what would have happened, if, at the outset, I had insisted she choose an academic topic and write accordingly? I suspect she would have mangled her descriptions and opinions by trying to make them conform to the requirements of an academic essay.

Lanham raises a similar point. We might see less ugly jargon if we gave writers (and college students?) more leeway to write in the prose style they feel comfortable with. Indeed, could it be that jargon emerges because writers are bored and constrained by the demands of writing objective prose? The more it forces them to suppress their verbal tics, the more they are tempted to rebel against it by smuggling in metaphor, cliché, humour, and jargon. All these forms of word play provide an outlet for pleasure and expressivity in writing. (p.118).

Can composition teachers learn anything from this discussion of jargon? Perhaps the first point is to be more tolerant of different prose styles. We might want to encourage our students to experiment writing a range of styles, including those that are heavy in jargon. A closely related approach is to teach students to translate between styles of English prose. There are literary precedents for this, but for English learners this might be seen as an exercise in stylistic sensitivity. A student who has practised

translating her personal informal style into academic prose and vice-versa may find it easier to tackle an academic essay.

Prose rhythm and reading aloud

Lanham begins the fifth chapter of *Anti-Text* exploring the distinction between poetic and prosaic styles. He disagrees with the view that they differ in how they convey message and image. The real difference, he argues, is simply typographical. Poetic typography signals to the reader that a particular collection of lines is to be seen as a poem: "Print it as poetry and it is poetry." (p.143). Surface structure again.

Of probably more interest to composition teachers are his comments on prose rhythm. For a student, the very notion that prose has a rhythm is alien because students rarely experience reading aloud. When they do it, it causes discomfort to speaker and listener. This confirms my own experience in my *content* classes. Towards the end of the semester, I ask students to give a short presentation. I proofread their texts beforehand but this does not necessary lead to a better performance. Lanham says the root of the problem lies again with the style of prose championed by style guides and composition books: it tends to elicit from the speaker a monotone that bores the listener and obscures meaning (p.144). But why bother reading aloud in the first place?

Every course in composition ought to be a course in Slow Reading. To read a prose text aloud, again and again, is the

most important single act you can perform, if you want to understand its style; if you do not read aloud (at least with the mind's ear), there will not be any. (p.146).

Simply put, reading a text aloud leads to a better feeling for good prose. Trimble makes the same point. (p.78)

Having advocated a return to Elizabethan teaching methods for composition, Lanham reaches back to the Classical age for lessons on reading aloud. He tells us a Greek or Roman schoolboy would study a text intensively, marking the figures of speech, analysing the imagery, and noting the shape of the sentence. He would then select appropriate gestures and memorise the speech. The speech might be rehearsed a dozen times until it became fluid and the student felt ready to perform it aloud. It hardly needs saying this type of learning is not found in modern classrooms. Debating classes don't count because they stress argument, not the impression that words create. Drama classes do focus on the pronunciation of words but they are not words written by the student. Perhaps the closest we get to the Classical ideal is found in public speaking courses, though even here there are limitations if students are only required to memorise and deliver "famous speeches" rather than their own work. Logically, the best place for a student to read her work aloud is in the composition class.

Yet if the average North American college student feels uncomfortable reading aloud, what will be the reaction of a

Japanese student with a less than perfect command of English? Won't she feel so tense reading out an imperfect first draft that a prose rhythm will fail to emerge? That certainly happens in my content classes where some students mumble out their presentations in a monotone. But on reflection, there is no reason for any student to stand at the front of the class and read her draft aloud to all without some sort of rehearsal. Conversation teachers know that small group work is an excellent way to get students to speak more fluently. A similar arrangement might work well with prose readings. If a student can read her draft without feeling too much stress, she has a chance to develop an ear for prose rhythm. The listeners can offer encouragement and feedback.

Be Yourself?

A short, final insight from *Anti-Text* concerns the notion of “a self” that writes. Students are often told to write sincerely, to write from the heart, to write honestly. Yet there seems to be something of a paradox here. We are familiar with established writers whose style draws on a strong sense of self. Lanham argues many adolescents lack such a strong sense of self and thus find it difficult to write “honestly.” They are still trying to find out what type of person they are; to ask them to write from the heart is unhelpful. The way out of this impasse is, as we would expect by now, stylistic. Though the author's argument is not wholly convincing, Lanham says that in order to build a strong self, adolescents needs to be exposed to a wide range of literary styles,

which they should be encouraged to imitate. I see the benefit of asking students to read widely, and even to imitate different styles, but I doubt this contributes to the building of a self. It also struck me that Lanham's view of self seems to be at odds with the postmodernist one. Briefly, postmodernists deny there is a simple unified identity, arguing instead for a self composed of multiple identities. The self we present to others in conversation varies according to a wide range of factors; similarly in writing. So perhaps a further reason why students find academic essays difficult to write, is that they have not yet mastered what self to present to the reader.

Conclusion

To sum up, let me list some of the recommendations for prose teaching from *Anti-Text* that I found stimulating:

Attention to style should be the goal of composition courses.

Taking pleasure in words is motivating.

Instructions to write clearly and to lay out arguments logically do not motivate.

Students should be encouraged to read their first drafts aloud in small groups.

Students' composition skills might benefit from imitating a range of prose styles.

Students might find it helpful to translate between different prose styles

Students might find it helpful to translate from informal English into the English prose of their subject discipline.

Students should have chances to write in a style they feel comfortable with, providing it is good English.

Students should not always have to “write from the heart”. It can be fun to write from the viewpoint of a different persona.

What stands out from this list is the emphasis Lanham gives to the imitation and translation of prose styles. It is an approach we might want to consider employing with Japanese learners of English. Apart from the benefits mentioned by Lanham, it might also reduce levels of plagiarism and copying. Composition teachers have long been concerned about plagiarism; they now have to worry about students who can buy made-to-order essays from online companies. Setting aside the ethical issues, what plagiarism and essay ordering share is the denial of creation. The student who plagiarises or who buys an essay loses the chance to think and write for herself. There is no wrestling with arguments and ideas, no decisions about word choice or phrasing - not even the physical act of typing is necessary. But there are powerful reasons for doing this — laziness, a last-minute panic, the lure of a high grade. We can never eliminate these factors, but we can offset them by thinking more carefully about the writing exercises we set our students. I think we put too much weight on originality in our composition classes. The pressure to write an original academic essay in a second language will always tempt some students to plagiarise or to buy an essay. But if a student were given a text and asked to translate or imitate its prose style, the opportunity and need to copy might diminish significantly.

Prudence tells us, though, that we should tread carefully in

seeking to implement these ideas in our English composition classes in Japan. Lanham writes elegantly and convincingly, but much of his argument is subjective; he draws on his extensive experience, yet mentions few empirical studies. Even more important, we need to keep in mind that Lanham's suggestions are aimed at improving the compositional skills of native English speakers at American colleges. Whether his ideas would work with Japanese learners of English is an open question. The best way to find out would seem to call for action research.

Notes

- 1 I follow Lanham from this point in referring to his book as *Anti-Text*.
- 2 When Lanham uses "translate" he refers to native English speakers moving from one English prose style to another. I have extended his use of this word to include non-native speakers. It does not imply converting words from one language to another.

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